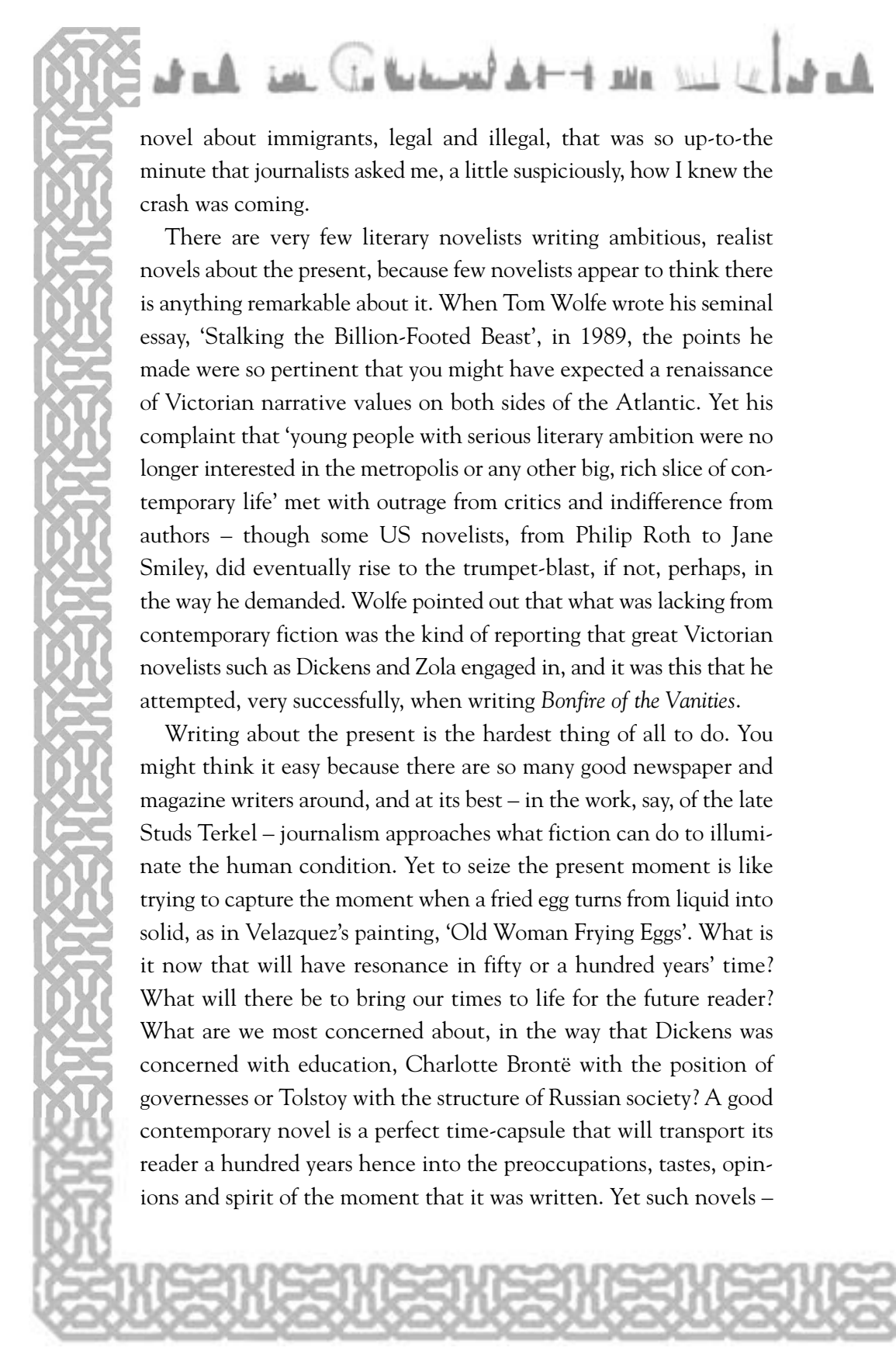




When the star of *The Wire*, Dominic West, attacked *Cranford*-style adaptations of classic English novels by the BBC on its *Today* programme recently, there was a collective sigh of relief. Not everyone is going to find *The Wire* as easy to watch as *Cranford*, and yet – how bored we are with bonnets and bustles! All those famous British actors endlessly corseted into sanitised versions of the past, with the candle-light playing over their perfect skin and teeth as they reiterate the latest version of a Jane Austen or a Dickens novel has made a mockery of a TV industry which was once at the cutting edge of all that was innovative and thrilling.

This nostalgia-fest, which would be met with scornful laughter in art, or architecture, or theatre, is also rampant in literature. *Hearts and Minds*, was published in the same month as A. S. Byatt, Hilary Mantel and Sarah Waters. All of these are very fine writers, and all, it so happens, have written period novels. Anyone who is interested in Tudor England, in Victorian England or in post-War England will probably be buying them, and all were pretty much guaranteed places on the bestseller charts and prize shortlists. Whereas I set out to take the DNA of a Victorian novel – its spirit of realism, its strong plot, its cast of characters who are not passively shaped by circumstances but who rise to challenges or escape them – to write a big London





novel about immigrants, legal and illegal, that was so up-to-the minute that journalists asked me, a little suspiciously, how I knew the crash was coming.

There are very few literary novelists writing ambitious, realist novels about the present, because few novelists appear to think there is anything remarkable about it. When Tom Wolfe wrote his seminal essay, 'Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast', in 1989, the points he made were so pertinent that you might have expected a renaissance of Victorian narrative values on both sides of the Atlantic. Yet his complaint that 'young people with serious literary ambition were no longer interested in the metropolis or any other big, rich slice of contemporary life' met with outrage from critics and indifference from authors – though some US novelists, from Philip Roth to Jane Smiley, did eventually rise to the trumpet-blast, if not, perhaps, in the way he demanded. Wolfe pointed out that what was lacking from contemporary fiction was the kind of reporting that great Victorian novelists such as Dickens and Zola engaged in, and it was this that he attempted, very successfully, when writing *Bonfire of the Vanities*.

Writing about the present is the hardest thing of all to do. You might think it easy because there are so many good newspaper and magazine writers around, and at its best – in the work, say, of the late Studs Terkel – journalism approaches what fiction can do to illuminate the human condition. Yet to seize the present moment is like trying to capture the moment when a fried egg turns from liquid into solid, as in Velazquez's painting, 'Old Woman Frying Eggs'. What is it now that will have resonance in fifty or a hundred years' time? What will there be to bring our times to life for the future reader? What are we most concerned about, in the way that Dickens was concerned with education, Charlotte Brontë with the position of governesses or Tolstoy with the structure of Russian society? A good contemporary novel is a perfect time-capsule that will transport its reader a hundred years hence into the preoccupations, tastes, opinions and spirit of the moment that it was written. Yet such novels –




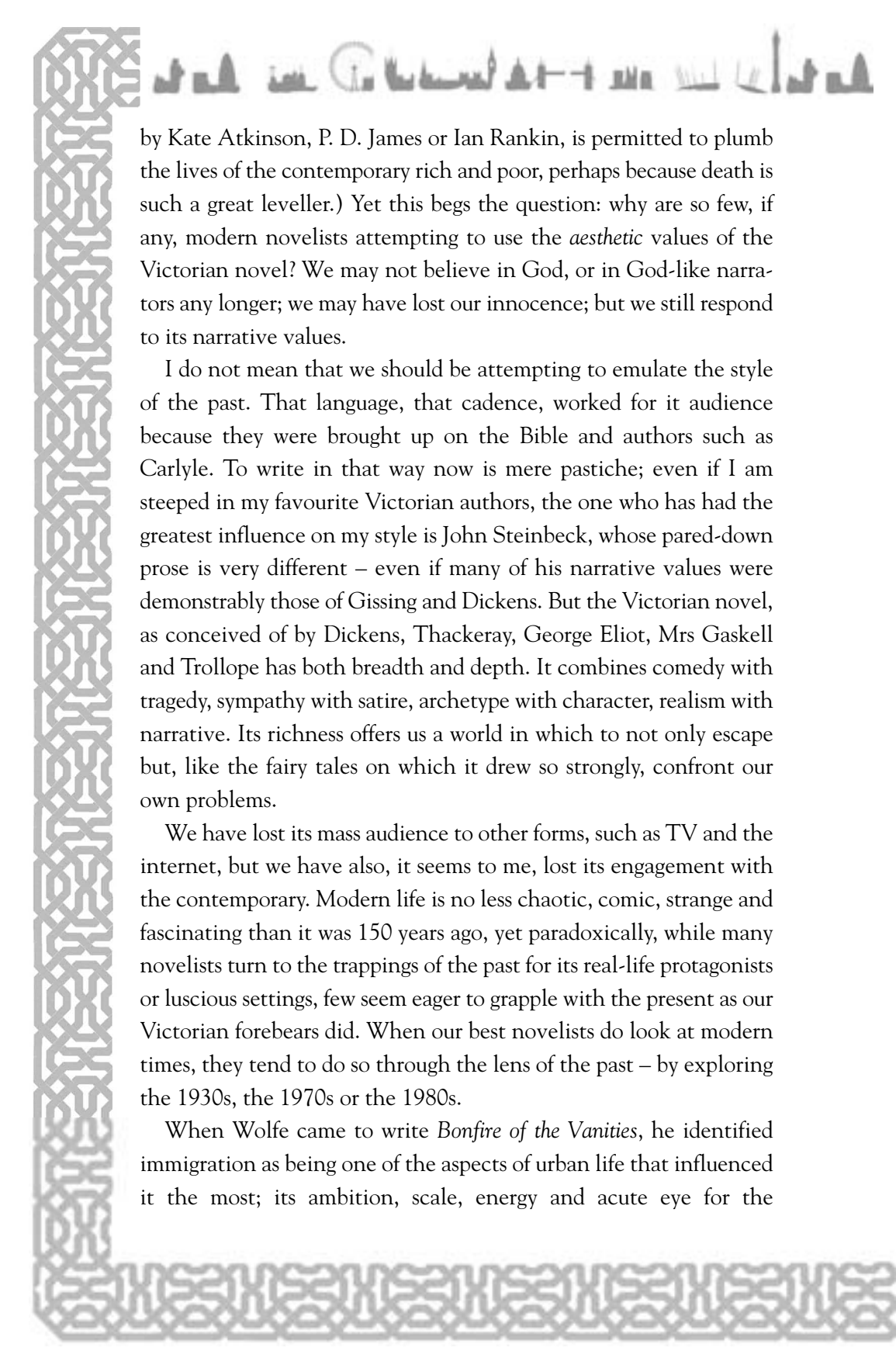
unless they are delivered to us from the developing world – are rare. What has remained consistently respectable and desirable are novels set in the past.

Underlying the thirst for historical novels is perhaps a collective feeling that literary fiction and imagination are not enough in themselves to make a novel worth reading – there must be an element of self-education, too. So you're not losing yourself in an imagined world, you're learning about Holbein or Vermeer. If you write a novel about Mrs Dickens or Cromwell or other real historical figures, that basis in fact becomes its justification for publication – and publicity.

I am not at all against all historical fiction. Very good examples of the genre like Byatt's *Possession* were not only better-written and researched than the average, but were anchored in the author's present, so have the perspective of time. J. G. Ballard's *The Siege of Krishnapur*, perhaps the best example of all, came when we were revisiting the legacy of the Empire for the first time; like Barry Unsworth's *Sacred Hunger*, it was genuinely novel, both in what it told us about the past and in its contemporary echoes. The winner of the 2008 Orange Prize, *Half of a Yellow Sun* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was set at exactly the same distance from the present as *War and Peace* – that is, Adichie didn't remember the war, but her grandparents did. But as the former Booker judge Kate Saunders says, 'historical fiction has always shaded into the romance market, and that's what people turn to in a depression. They want BBC set dressing, not the fact that the past smelt of shit.'

We associate the modern literary novel with grit and grime, perhaps for the simple reason that when it is not – as with Ian McEwan's much-maligned novel, *Saturday* – readers get irked. Why isn't our life like that of Henry Perowne, with his elegant house in London, his enviable gadgets, and the whole paraphernalia of a successful professional life? Material comforts, while totally acceptable when seen through a glass darkly in Austen or Trollope, becomes smug brand name-checking in our own time. (Only the detective story, as written







by Kate Atkinson, P. D. James or Ian Rankin, is permitted to plumb the lives of the contemporary rich and poor, perhaps because death is such a great leveller.) Yet this begs the question: why are so few, if any, modern novelists attempting to use the *aesthetic* values of the Victorian novel? We may not believe in God, or in God-like narrators any longer; we may have lost our innocence; but we still respond to its narrative values.

I do not mean that we should be attempting to emulate the style of the past. That language, that cadence, worked for its audience because they were brought up on the Bible and authors such as Carlyle. To write in that way now is mere pastiche; even if I am steeped in my favourite Victorian authors, the one who has had the greatest influence on my style is John Steinbeck, whose pared-down prose is very different – even if many of his narrative values were demonstrably those of Gissing and Dickens. But the Victorian novel, as conceived of by Dickens, Thackeray, George Eliot, Mrs Gaskell and Trollope has both breadth and depth. It combines comedy with tragedy, sympathy with satire, archetype with character, realism with narrative. Its richness offers us a world in which to not only escape but, like the fairy tales on which it drew so strongly, confront our own problems.


We have lost its mass audience to other forms, such as TV and the internet, but we have also, it seems to me, lost its engagement with the contemporary. Modern life is no less chaotic, comic, strange and fascinating than it was 150 years ago, yet paradoxically, while many novelists turn to the trappings of the past for its real-life protagonists or luscious settings, few seem eager to grapple with the present as our Victorian forebears did. When our best novelists do look at modern times, they tend to do so through the lens of the past – by exploring the 1930s, the 1970s or the 1980s.

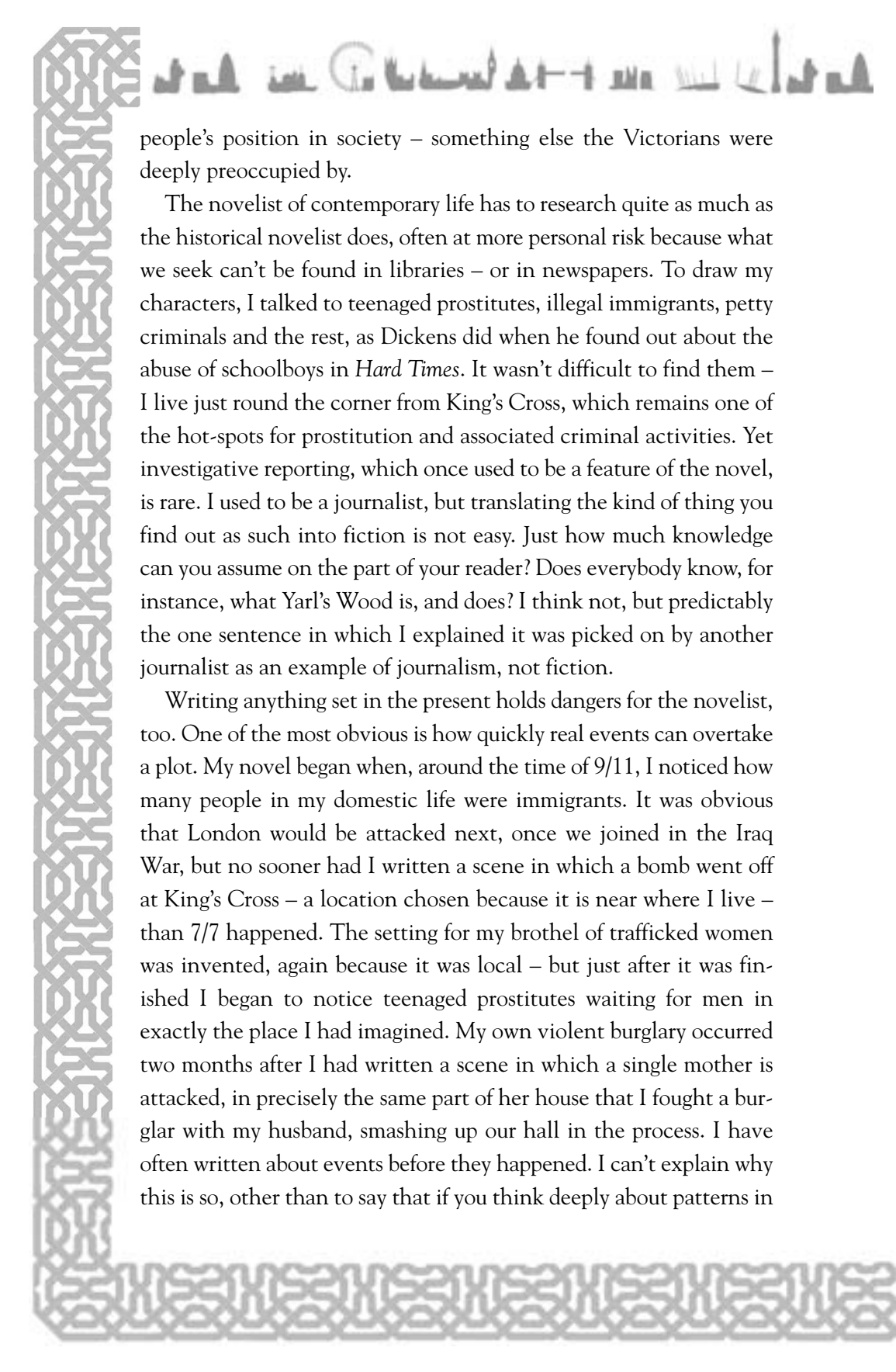
When Wolfe came to write *Bonfire of the Vanities*, he identified immigration as being one of the aspects of urban life that influenced it the most; its ambition, scale, energy and acute eye for the



contemporary was all underscored by this apprehension. Though America has its own distinct problems and ideology, the most interesting aspect of life in Britain is also its dependence on foreign labour, much of it illegal or black market, living in our midst yet disenfranchised and ignored. Such people are often as downtrodden as Jane Eyre, as manipulative as Augustus Melmotte or as abused and abusive as Nancy and Bill Sykes – and yet the point where the Victorian novelist would have taken off into a portrayal of how fragile status and class are is side-stepped. Class, and the exploitation of one portion of society by another, has become the elephant in the room. Rose Tremain's *The Road Home*, Marina Lewycka's *Two Caravans*, and Monice Ali's *Brick Lane* all, like my own *Hearts and Minds*, depict aspects of immigration. Wonderful as they are, these are highly internalised worlds. They do not show how immigrants are likely to make connection with us – that is, the largely white, professional classes. They show a single strand of immigration, not the rich, intertwining tapestry. What I've aimed to do is to take the engine of novels such as *Our Mutual Friend* and, by showing how five people are connected to each other through work, love, friendship and crime, tried to write the kind of big, panoramic fiction that is part-detective novel, part-satire and all about the way we live now.

How could anyone think that modern life is thin, when so many stories live and breathe around us? We don't need to set fiction in the past to find outsiders and insiders, moral choice, reversals of fortune and violent conflict. It's right on our doorstep. At the height of the boom, you might find your house being painted by a lawyer and an architect; I have had a philosopher as a cleaner, an art graduate as an au pair and a musician pruning my garden. The former strength of the English pound and the desperation of people in Eastern Europe fuelled a situation in which professional people could live in a perfect bubble of competence and intelligence, served by other professional people who listened to Radio One or never left the loo seat up. This struck me as an interesting way of exploring the frailty of status, and






people's position in society – something else the Victorians were deeply preoccupied by.

The novelist of contemporary life has to research quite as much as the historical novelist does, often at more personal risk because what we seek can't be found in libraries – or in newspapers. To draw my characters, I talked to teenaged prostitutes, illegal immigrants, petty criminals and the rest, as Dickens did when he found out about the abuse of schoolboys in *Hard Times*. It wasn't difficult to find them – I live just round the corner from King's Cross, which remains one of the hot-spots for prostitution and associated criminal activities. Yet investigative reporting, which once used to be a feature of the novel, is rare. I used to be a journalist, but translating the kind of thing you find out as such into fiction is not easy. Just how much knowledge can you assume on the part of your reader? Does everybody know, for instance, what Yarl's Wood is, and does? I think not, but predictably the one sentence in which I explained it was picked on by another journalist as an example of journalism, not fiction.

Writing anything set in the present holds dangers for the novelist, too. One of the most obvious is how quickly real events can overtake a plot. My novel began when, around the time of 9/11, I noticed how many people in my domestic life were immigrants. It was obvious that London would be attacked next, once we joined in the Iraq War, but no sooner had I written a scene in which a bomb went off at King's Cross – a location chosen because it is near where I live – than 7/7 happened. The setting for my brothel of trafficked women was invented, again because it was local – but just after it was finished I began to notice teenaged prostitutes waiting for men in exactly the place I had imagined. My own violent burglary occurred two months after I had written a scene in which a single mother is attacked, in precisely the same part of her house that I fought a burglar with my husband, smashing up our hall in the process. I have often written about events before they happened. I can't explain why this is so, other than to say that if you think deeply about patterns in






society, or a character, it is quite easy to make a pretty accurate guess about what may happen next.

In contrast to the praise heaped on the researches of the historical novelist, the writer of contemporary fiction faces considerable dangers even if they are not as unfortunate as Salman Rushdie. I myself was accused of libelling a real-life critic in a contemporary novel I wrote in 1997, *A Vicious Circle*. The novelist who sets their work in modern times is vulnerable to an antiquated law that insists, in the case of libel, that a defendant prove a character is not based on a real-life individual, rather than the other way around. A number of good authors who have fallen foul of this law have had their work pulped and their finances destroyed. Setting your story in the past is a much safer choice. You cannot, obviously, be the madman described in a novel if the character apparently resembling yours wears a top hat.

If you write about the present in the way that Victorian novelists did, then even if you concentrate on the private lives of imaginary individuals, you are going to capture something that can't, at least, be pastiche. For pastiche, really, is what almost all historical fiction is – even when written in the historic present, or interleaved with post-modernist passages. It is a book made up of other books, not lives that are witnessed and investigated. It may require imagination to flesh out academic research but it categorically does not require courage. Films such as *Anne of A Thousand Days*, *Cromwell* and *Emma* may have seemed absolutely convincing re-creations of the period to their audiences but, just like historical fiction, they remain absolutely of the era in which they were made. Only they do not tend to tell us much beyond the particular misconceptions of their time, and they do so in a way that looks not only dated but dull.

Of course, I enjoy this kind of thing as much as anyone else, and I am not against the writing or reading of historical fiction. I am simply mystified by the way it now dominates the acceptable face of literary fiction quite so much (especially when you consider how its





opposite, science fiction, is so derided and ghettoised that J. G. Ballard, one of the greatest and most prescient writers of our time, was only shortlisted for the Booker for his historical novel, *Empire of the Sun*.) Is it that readers distrust anything that is purely the product of a writer's imagination and powers of observation? Do we only trust stories which are 'based on a true story', however this is interpreted?

Shakespeare could set his plays in any time or place, because we believe his people are real; their passions, if not their preoccupations, remain eternal. The way the world works does not change, no matter how much scientific knowledge we have acquired since Tudor times. But it requires genius to do this. By failing to notice or celebrate our own age, with all its eccentricities and agonies, and by sticking our collective heads into bonnets, we fail also to understand what is special about the way we live now. This is the Victorian's legacy to us, and this, I believe, is what we have to rediscover.

*Amanda Craig*

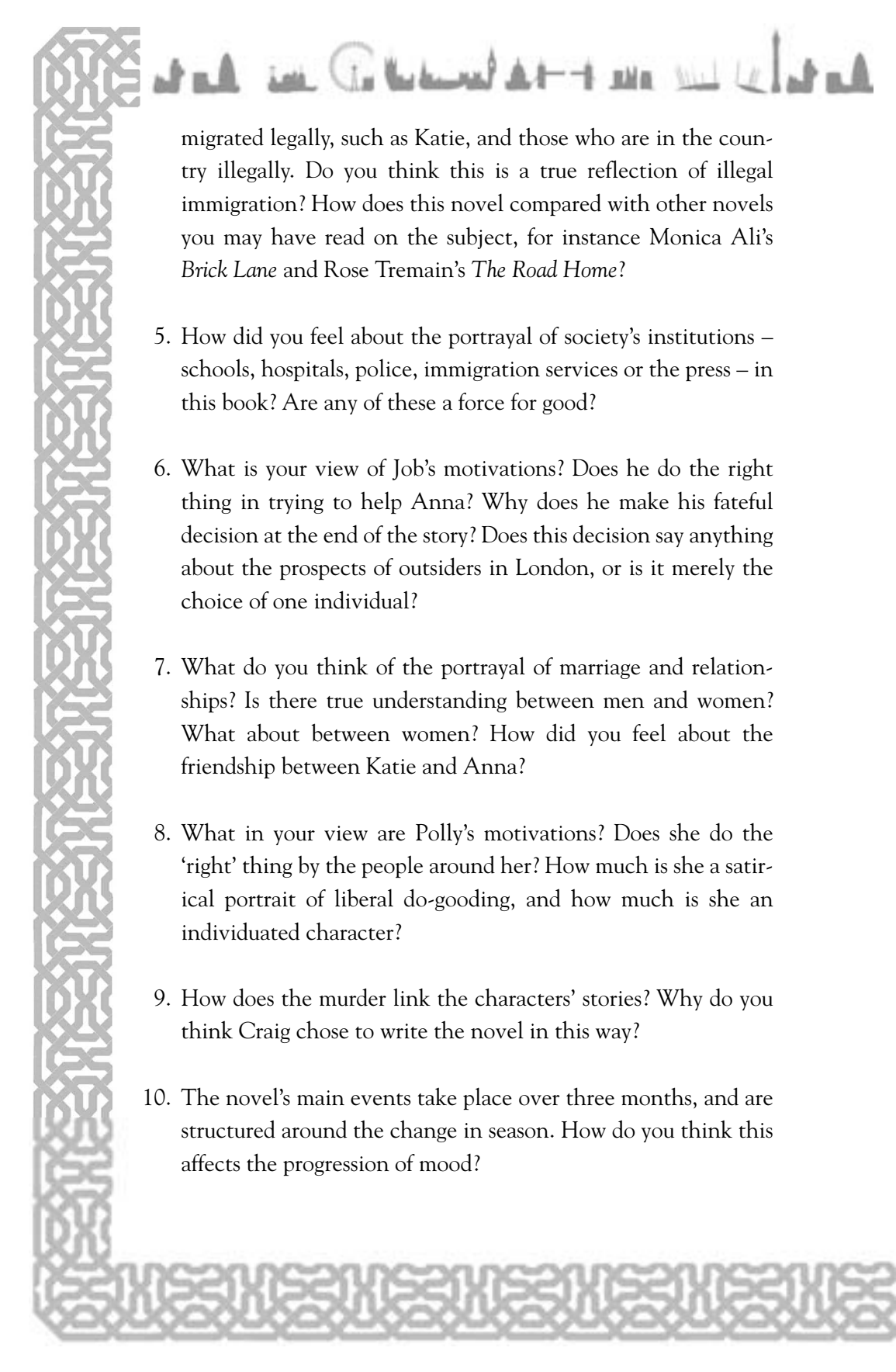
This article first appeared in the *Independent* in April 2009



## *Hearts and Minds* Reading Guide

1. How successful do you feel Amanda Craig is at updating the Victorian novel for the twenty-first-century, recreating 'its spirit of realism, its strong plot, its cast of characters who are not passively shaped by circumstances but who rise to challenges or escape them'? Did this book remind you of any others?
2. How do its style, scope and themes differ from other big London novels as conceived of in novels such as Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*, Anthony Trollope's *The Way We Live Now* or George Gissing's *New Grub St*? How does it differ from other contemporary novels about London?
3. London itself is a character in the book. What do you think of Craig's portrait of the city? Why do you think that it opens on Hampstead Heath, and what is the significance of the two quotations in the Preface by TS Eliot and Wordsworth? How do the characters relate to the city?
4. Legal and illegal immigration is the main theme of the book. Discuss the differences in the experience of those who have





migrated legally, such as Katie, and those who are in the country illegally. Do you think this is a true reflection of illegal immigration? How does this novel compare with other novels you may have read on the subject, for instance Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* and Rose Tremain's *The Road Home*?

5. How did you feel about the portrayal of society's institutions – schools, hospitals, police, immigration services or the press – in this book? Are any of these a force for good?
6. What is your view of Job's motivations? Does he do the right thing in trying to help Anna? Why does he make his fateful decision at the end of the story? Does this decision say anything about the prospects of outsiders in London, or is it merely the choice of one individual?
7. What do you think of the portrayal of marriage and relationships? Is there true understanding between men and women? What about between women? How did you feel about the friendship between Katie and Anna?
8. What in your view are Polly's motivations? Does she do the 'right' thing by the people around her? How much is she a satirical portrait of liberal do-gooding, and how much is she an individuated character?
9. How does the murder link the characters' stories? Why do you think Craig chose to write the novel in this way?
10. The novel's main events take place over three months, and are structured around the change in season. How do you think this affects the progression of mood?



11. Why do you think the setting of the novel is not only London, but North London? What do you associate with that area?
  
12. How do all the characters change? Which character, in your view, changes most, and which the least? If you have read any of Craig's other novels, in which some characters reappear, which do you think has changed the most? Whom would you like to meet again?

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